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Raymond Chandler and His Ambiguous Relationships to Women: A Search for Hidden Meanings within His Crime Novels

Raymond Chandler (1888–1959) is recognized today as one of the greats of American crime fiction. In the "hard-boiled" pattern of Dashiell Hammett, he is often described as a realistic writer of the American scene in the 1940s. And a dark vision it is, filled with betrayal and dishonesty, wherein even the protagonist is not a hero. A Chandler detective may have more integrity than the other characters in the story, but not that much more. His clients have hidden agendas and devious motives, especially the women. None are pure, some even are diabolical and evil.

Chandler began writing crime fiction in his mid-forties, but had been writing poetry and essays since his college days in England (MacShane 1976: 23). He modeled his first crime stories on those of Dashiell Hammett, whose writing he admired, and sought to have them published in *Black Mask*, a very successful "pulp" magazine where Hammett also published some of his fiction (MacShane 1976: 48–49).

His first published short story was "Blackmailers Don't Shoot," which he later described as "pure pastiche" (MacShane 1976: 51). In 1939, after five years of writing short stories for various pulps, he produced his first novel, *The Big Sleep* (MacShane 1976: 61; Freeman 2007: 174–175, 177). Six more novels followed (*Farewell, My Lovely*, 1940; *The High Window*, 1942; *The Lady in the Lake*, 1943; *The Little Sister*, 1949; *The Long Goodbye*, 1954; *Playback*, 1958), and in his lifetime three collections of his short stories also were compiled (*The Simple Art of Murder*, 1950; *Trouble Is My Business*, 1950; *Pick-up on Noon Street*, 1953). Another short story collection, *Killer in the Rain* (1964), was released posthumously. His last novel, unfinished when he died in 1959, was *Poodle Springs*, later completed by Robert Parker with the permission of the Chandler estate (1989). Parker later wrote a sequel, *Perchance to Dream* (1991).

Although widely hailed for his almost brutal realism, as the co-authors have previously demonstrated (Kania 2000a; 2000b; Kania and Pervushina 2003), his works lack realism in one dimension in particular, that relating to gender. In the depiction of women both as crime victims and crime perpetrators, especially the latter, his fictional cases show an unmistakable gender bias. Actual American crime statistics show a slightly higher rate of victimization of women than is shown in Chandler's novels (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1996). More importantly, other American crime statistics (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999) show a much lower incidence of women as criminal offenders than Chandler's novels suggest.

In the examination of assailants and victims in Chandler's novels previously reported by the co-authors (Kania and Pervushina 2003), we calculated that 80% of his fictional violent criminal offenders are male, and 20% female, omitting one unknown assailant. Thus violent women are the assailants at a level disproportionately higher in Chandler's works, 20% (20 of 102). This is almost twice the frequency found in the official U.S. crime statistics (11%) and more than twice the frequency in the novels of his literary model, Dashiell Hammett (8%). Chandler's 20% female assailants clearly exceed the expected level of violence to be attributed to women, whether that expectation be based on reality or on modeling from Hammett.

Not only does he write of women as killers at a higher frequency that official statistics show, he makes multiple murderers of Velma Valento in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Carmen Sternwood in *The Big Sleep* and Mildred Haviland in *Lady in the Lake*, writing at a time when female serial killers were exceptionally rare.

For the scholar inclined toward a psychological vein of literary analysis, this invites a sincere inquiry into his state of mind regarding women. Did Chandler actually think that women were more dangerous than they are in real life? Did he anticipate or experience violent behavior in the women he knew? Did Chandler fear women in general?

Because Chandler (2000: 20, 52) claims to have written with a spontaneous, improvisational style, it is unlikely that he deliberately chose to over-emphasize women offenders in his novels and short stories, or to cast Marlowe's relationship with women in any particular way. Yet he did, and so we may suspect that he did so unconsciously. Thus it is his unconscious motivations which we hope to explore in the current analysis.

Women in his stories are often portrayed as both attractive and attracted, perhaps even over-attracted, to Chandler's characters, Philip Marlow in particular. They frequently emerge as sensual, over-sexed, sexually aggressive,

forward, and even promiscuous. But Marlow is not particularly responsive to their attentions. As Sergei Belov explains:

> Marlow is an object of women's attention again and again. It proves that, on the one hand, this character is a real man, on the other hand, it reminds the audience that a woman can be dangerous if somebody is involved in a passionate affair with her. She can harm or even destroy a man. This idea presented an old cliché, a stereotype of the American mass consciousness connected with anti-feminism. [...] The genre of hard-boiled detective fiction absorbed the philosophy and the code of American individualism. In the framework of this genre a woman is viewed as a potential, eternal source of evil. That is why in many hard-boiled detective novels a woman is responsible for all the problems and damages.
>
> (Belov 2003: 12–13, trans. L. Pervushina)[1]

In 1949 Gershon Legman claimed to find evidence of latent homosexuality implicit in the Marlowe character, and by implication in Chandler (Abbott 2002: 75), a claim Chandler disputed directly (Freeman 2007: 163–164). Be the charge valid or not, we do believe that Chandler had unresolved issues with powerful women, which manifest themselves in his novels.

Chandler wrote in what he described as a "whorehouse style" (2000: 59). Yet that expression of his clearly suggests a negative view of some women, the working occupants of whorehouses. This negativity toward the sexuality of at least some women does not explain why Chandler had, at the very least, a subtle, unconscious motivation to portray women as threatening.

Trying to understand why this is so, and why Chandler differs from other hard-boiled crime fiction writers on this stylistic point, is open to speculation. It could be that Chandler consciously perceived women as more threatening than his contemporaries and wrote to accentuate this viewpoint. He may have been a latent homosexual as Legman and Abbott suggest. Similarly, owing to cynicism, he may have been far less likely to employ the motif of the "damsels in distress" under the protection of the modern knight errant, the private eye. Alternatively, he simply may have sought to "flip" the pattern of other crime novelists of his times to give his mysteries more originality. Perhaps something

[1] Филип Марло снова и снова выступает объектом женского внимания – доказательство того, что он – «настоящий мужчина», и в то же время – напоминание о том, что женщина порой несет погибель тому, кто хоть краем оказался задет бурей страстей. Последнее – штамп американского сознания, окрашенного антифеминизмом. [...] «Крутой детектив», перенявший систему кодекса американского индивидуализма, оставил женщину в вечном подозрении как источник зла, и не случайно во многих «крутых детективах» ей суждено нести основную ответственность за причиненный ущерб.

in his own life experiences revealed itself in his fiction. Determining which of these alternative explanations better explains his motivation is a question which Chandler scholars need to undertake.

Considering Chandler's unusual domestic relationships, this bias may suggest a hidden hostility toward or fear of women lurking in this presumed "macho" male writer's personality. Frank MacShane's biography of Chandler (1976) and a more recent biographical study of Chandler by Judith Freeman (2007) offer considerable insights into the ambiguous relationships of this major American literary figure with the women in his life and in his fiction.

In some ways Chandler appears as a "mamma's boy." He lived with his mother until her death in 1924. He was thirty-five years of age at her death and had never married. Just two weeks later he married Cissy Pascal (Freeman 2007: 46–47), with whom he had been having an affair for some years, dating back to when she was married to another man (MacShane 1976: 32). Cissy was eighteen years older than Chandler and had a colorful past history. Supposedly a nude model in her youth, her marriage to Chandler was her third. Chandler referred to her as "highly sexed" and her letters to him being "pretty hot" (Freeman 2007: 64). In 1924, the year of her marriage to Chandler, at fifty-three she was still a stunningly attractive woman, but soon her age began to show and a series of lingering ailments began to drain her past vitality and beauty. In these later years Chandler became more of a caretaker for his invalid wife than an equal marriage partner. The relationship began to mirror his past relationship with his ailing mother.

Marlowe's labors in the cause of justice cannot rescue him from his solitude and the emptiness of his personal life. The narration is progressively more melodramatic and Marlowe is shown as getting more lonely from one tale to the next. There is a yearning for some form of fulfillment that life has yet to give him. Perhaps that emptiness was manifesting itself in Chandler's life also as the ailing Cissy became less of a lover, partner and companion.

While Marlowe "can keep a safe distance" from some of the women he encounters, Belov notes that he is not "made of stone" (2003: 13). He rebuffs the sexual overtures of the millionaire's daughter in *The Long Goodbye*, and does not surrender to the charms of sexually manipulative Velma, whom he meets as the dangerously tempting Mrs. Grail in *Farewell, My Lovely*. But in that same novel he finds Ann Riordan more interesting and a spark of romance emerges between them in. Their romance fails to develop, but later he falls in love with Linda Loring and is contemplating their marriage in his last novel *Playback*. Although he did not finish his last novel, *Poodle Springs*, its initial

chapters and outline portray Marlowe as married, and contentedly so. Thus his response to women varies as his perceptions of them varies.

Philip Marlowe varies in another way, as he succumbs to the forces of time, aging with the novels. In *The Big Sleep* (1939) he is in his early thirties, and by *The Long Goodbye* (1954) he is in his late forties. The passage of time, contemporary events, and his difficult experiences with crime, criminals and clients shape his character and personality. He becomes cynical and sadder for it. This aspect of the Marlowe character was superbly presented in the film adaptation of *Farewell, My Lovely* with Robert Mitchum and Charlotte Rampling (Dir. Dick Richards. AVCO Embassy Pictures, 1975). Mitchum as Marlowe exudes exhaustion, melancholy and despair. In such a mood, it could be expected that a man, even if a normally healthy heterosexual, might have a depressed libido. But an alternative explanation continues to be raised – that women really do not interest Marlowe nor his creator, Chandler.

Megan Abbott (2002), using a deconstructionist approach and expanding upon a 1949 critique by Gershon Legman, suggests that questionable behaviors in the superficial masculinity of the key Philip Marlowe character hint at his latent homosexuality, and by implication latent homosexuality in Chandler. Marlowe is suspect because he never succumbs to the sexual temptations of the devious women he encounters. But Marlowe is not a clear surrogate for Chandler. Also this analysis of Marlowe is flawed. In several of his novels he does respond to a woman romantically. Ann Riordan stirs his libido in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) but Marlowe fails to take the opportunity of having a sexual relationship with her, an event cited to raise doubts about his sexual orientation (Freeman 2007: 162). He does court Linda Loring, first met in *The Long Goodbye* (1954) and appearing again in *Playback* (1958), and it is she whom Marlowe was to marry in *Poodle Springs* (Chandler and Parker 1989). Marlowe resists the charms of wicked women, misses an opportunity to seduce the honorable Ann Riordan, but surrenders to true love and romance with Linda Loring. Thus our analysis does not concur with the implication of an exclusive, latent homosexual orientation for Marlowe. He is quite able to respond romantically and passionately in heterosexual relationships, even if not in every potential relationship with a woman. As Chandler himself expressed it, "the fictional detective is a catalyst, not a Casanova" (1950: *x*).

Nor does the characterization of latent homosexuality fit Chandler. He very easily succumbed to heterosexual temptations. His history was that of a womanizer, guilty of multiple adulteries (Freeman 2007: 93, 100–102, 105–106, 214–217), who sought out and enjoyed the company of women, romantically

and sexually. And of these, several could have served as models for the evil and manipulative characters in his novels (Freeman 2007: 304, 308, 310–315).

He occasionally wrote or spoke disparagingly of homosexual men and of those who associated him with them (Freeman 2007: 158, 164, 290), but also included a gay pairing in the short story "Pearls Are a Nuisance." While some critics have labeled him a homophobe, others still suggest he was a closeted gay (Freeman 2007: 158, 196). Of course, both could be true, and this could have been the compensatory behavior of a man with self-doubts, chasing women to chase off homosexual urges. Such reasoning may be possible, but the arguments are not compelling in the face of the contrary evidence of his heterosexual orientation and behaviors.

His heterosexual yearnings for Cissy Pascal, who became his wife in 1924, suggests that he was interested in women, and fancied romantic love (MacShane 1976: 32). He began to court Cissy while she was still married to Julian Pascal, her second husband. She was already in her forties, but looked far younger. Also she dressed and behaved as a much younger woman (Freeman 2007: 64). Julian Pascal was older than Cissy, "a frail and delicate man who looked older than he was" (MacShane 1976: 32). Cissy was uncomfortable leaving Julian for Raymond, saying that she did love Julian, but loved Raymond more (MacShane 1976: 32). So, could the cheating ways of Mrs. Grayle be based loosely upon the infidelity of Cissy and her betrayal of Julian for Raymond? If so, then perhaps Chandler is providing the rationalization for her abandoning Julian, his age and infirmity holding back the energy of the younger woman and failing to measure up to her libido.

When the tables turned in the later years of their marriage, in the 1940s, when her age and ailments made Cissy sexually unavailable, he remained devoted to looking after her, watching after her health and welfare. However, he aggressively began pursuing and propositioning secretaries at Paramount Studios where he was under contract as a screen writer (Freeman 2007: 214–217).

So there is another option also based on the history of Chandler and Cissy. Chandler's women characters were unfaithful or promiscuous and the married ones were adulterous. So too was Chandler. He was a serial adulterer. Yet he truly was devoted to his wife. Could his story be inverted into his women characters? Consider that his character Velma/Mrs. Grayle in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) is married to a much older man. Velma was a Hollywood "wanna-be" (an aspiring actress), a "B-girl" (a prostitute who meets potential clients in bars) and a "moll" (a mistress) to a minor gangster Moose Malone, who considered her "as cute as lace pants" (Eder 1975) before she met and married the much

older Judge Grayle. Perhaps Judge Grayle is to Cissy Chandler as Mrs. Grayle is to Raymond Chandler. The much younger partner, still devoted to the older spouse, each was seeking the romance and passion of others closer to their respective ages and with matching libidos.

A similar situation is implied in the case of General Sternwood and his two daughters. They are the products of his unsuccessful marriage to another much younger woman. Mrs. Sternwood is an absent character in the novel *The Big Sleep* (1939). It is implied that their two daughters carry her bad seed, and that the elderly and infirmed General Sternwood passively accepts their moral deviance. Cissy too was much infirmed in her later years, and whether or not she knew of Chandler's later dalliances, she certainly knew of some of his earlier ones. Was she willing to accommodate his infidelities?

Perhaps ironically Frank MacShane attributes the criminality and viciousness of many of Chandler's female characters to a form of feminism (1976: 54). By portraying women as having the capacity to be criminal, violent and deviously determined to have their way, Chandler is showing women as having strength and fortitude. They are not passive pawns of the men in their lives, but they successfully manipulate the men they encounter. They are strong, even courageous in pursuing their criminal objectives. Only the morally strong Philip Marlowe shows the ability to withstand the temptations and manipulations of these determined women.

So we have multiple explanations of why Raymond Chandler disproportionately frequently portrays women as criminals in his novels. Was Raymond Chandler simply fearful of women? Was he a "mamma's boy," who easily succumbed to the power of women over him? Was he a latent homosexual who scorned women? Did he create women characters modeled on his wife Cissy? Or did he invert his relationship with Cissy to provide a model for his cheating on women, a cheating Raymond Chandler? Was he writing as a precursor to feminism by creating strong women antagonists? The answer will forever remain ambiguous. Chandler cannot tell us now, and if he had while still living, could we be sure that his self-assessment would have been accurate? Whichever explanation for his negative depiction of women in his fiction one decides to accept, considering them all may give us clearer understanding of his literary contributions to American literature and the understanding of male-female relationships in mid-twentieth-century America.

The Chandler crime novels are characterized by that special appeal which is reflected in the desire of their readers to re-read his books again and again. He enriched the genre of the detective novel by revealing the dynamics of the

psychological states of his characters, both male and female. Chandler once stated that "the detective story for a variety reasons can seldom be promoted. It is usually about murder and hence lacks the elements of uplift" (Chandler 1994: 387). We cannot totally agree. The novels of Chandler certainly warrant promotion, in spite of their "noire" moods and lack of moral uplift. They offer opportunities to explore the soul – of the characters, of Chandler himself, and of ourselves.

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